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## The founder and his brand: plastic semiotics, semi-symbolism, and the amalgamation of corporate and private identities in the anti-ageing wellness market\*

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**Abstract:** Through the analysis of two brands in the health, wellness, and longevity sector — *Bulletproof* and *Primal Blueprint* — this article examines the amalgamation of brand identity and the lifestyle ideologies of the founders, creating a “total lifestyle” that exceeds the consumption of commodities. The analyses of both brands as isolated entities and the relations they construct within the sector explore the various contrasts constituting the problem of “identity” — both brand and personal, public and private — utilising concepts and methods of analysis developed throughout Jean-Marie Floch’s body of work. In particular, this article revisits his Plastic Semiotics, exploring the semi-symbolism constructed in the logos and the alimentary discourses produced by both brands. The article concludes with a reflection on the significant mechanisms marking the brands’ trajectories from dissenting actors in a sector to authoritative brands aligned with the status quo, interrogating the extent to which such trajectories are aligned with transformations in the brands’ semiotic structures.

**Keywords:** plastic semiotics; semi-symbolism; visual identities; branding; wellness and longevity.

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## Introduction

**A** core theme in Jean-Marie Floch's body of work and his proposition of Plastic Semiotics surrounds the matter of *contrast*. In his analysis of a nude by the photographer Edouard Boubat, he defines contrast as the realisation of the complex term derived from the visual category of transition or the result of the textualisation of two contraries individuated from the category originating this complex (FLOCH, 1985, p. 23). His utilisation of semi-symbolic systems — a significant system where the conformity of both planes, expression and content, occurs not through isolated terms but necessarily through categories (GREIMAS, 1984, p. 21) — is grounded in this mutual presupposition of contraries that determines the visual semiosis: in a visual system, this coexistence of both plastic terms will be homologated to the ideological values, in the plane of content, that this contrast visually signifies.

Particularly in his analysis of the writing and drawings of Roland Barthes (FLOCH, 1985), but especially in his work consecrated to the universe of brands (FLOCH, 1990, 1995), the idea of identity itself emerges as a matter of contrast and of the necessary, mutually presupposed manifestation of opposing terms — as complex terms, as well as neutral terms. Semi-symbolic systems, in his analyses, emerge as what permits a brand to express its own contradictions (Chanel) or complex mythical thinking conjoining opposing worlds (Michel Bras), as well as articulations of semiotic symmetries between brands (Apple and IBM).

The case presented in this article aims to embrace both the internal complexity of the identity of a brand and the relations it creates within a market sector, which invites the possibility of analysing how symmetric relations between brands can shed light on how brand identities manipulate social and cultural discourses to produce connotations of the same plane of content. Our selected companies — *Bulletproof* and *Primal Blueprint* — belong to the sector of health, wellness, and longevity. Besides the complex relations established within the system of each brand and with each other, those two brands permit the analysis of yet another phenomenon: the mutual presupposition constructed between *public* and *private* or the amalgamation of the identities of brand and founder. Rather than two separate discourses, brand and product become expressions of the founder's lifestyle, which becomes a core part of the values being sold. In his study of Chanel, Floch (1995, p. 136) discusses the matter of style as a principle of sensitive invariance he links with a "life project" or "ethical vision" of self: a definition close to how the market understands *lifestyle*, invoking figures of a *desirable* or *aspirational* way of living. In that sense, this amalgamation of identities shifts the consumption of commodities from the support of a *total look* — the imitation of a figurative dimension — to the matter of a *total lifestyle* — the aspiration to partake in an ethics of cultivation of self.

The study of both brands in their visual identities and the intricate web of storytelling they create — through their multi-sector offers in food, supplements, lifestyle objects and programmes, bestselling books, and a sea of web content — aims at an analysis of how the discourse of brand and founder can no longer be distinguished, and the extent to which this union is in the process of becoming a new criterion of “authenticity”. A complex concept in the 21st-century discursive landscapes, in the entrepreneurial space, authenticity is defined simply as being truthful to one’s values. While this projected authenticity remains a problem of discursive effect, in Algirdas-Julien Greimas’ (1983) terms, emerging forms of communicating truth invite new forms of “sincerity” that are perceived as dissociated from the idea of discursive contracts (VAN DEN AKKER; GIBBONS; VERMEULEN, 2017), and aligned with our selected case and the problem of perceived personal projected self-images as more “truthful” than separate personal and corporate identities.

Through the study of both brands’ visual identities, side by side with their alimentary discourses and the lifestyle ideologies they create, this article aims to bring Floch’s Semiotics of brands — emerging from the consumer cultures of the 1980s and 1990s — into the 21st-century consumer cultures (and the new, unique research problems it poses). The aim of this contribution is to show how the articulation of his many propositions is valuable to understand the dynamics of brands, their identities, and the discourses around them.

## 1. The semi-symbolism of Bulletproof’s dissenting discourse

Appearing in 2011, *Bulletproof* is more than a seller of wellness-related products—from coffee to “tech”. Born from Dave Asprey’s (49) personal mythology, the brand’s products and web and print content linked to it are an expression of the founder’s trajectory in recovering his health. Disseminating a story of his success as an entrepreneur in his 20s, Asprey avows he suffered from a myriad of conditions resulting from toxic mould exposure — mental illness, cognitive decline, obesity, pre-diabetes, digestive issues, and difficulty in recovering from injuries (ASPREY, 2017, 2019, 2021). Destitute from his health and having exhausted available Western medicine avenues, he started a journey of self-experimentation, research, and exposure to experimental, unregulated, underground substances, supplements, therapies, contraptions, and regimens inspired both by the latest scientific developments and ancient bodily practices with the aim of appropriating his object of value. His quest resulted in a *bricolage* of several traditions that can be summed up as the conjunction of categories: Nature/Culture, Ancient/Futuristic, non-Western/Western. In the union of those opposites, his verbal and visual storytelling births semi-symbolic systems through which narratives of “ageing backwards” are disseminated, resignifying

society's understanding of what health and illness mean while also reimagining the relations established between our biological and social bodies.

The ethos of *Bulletproof* can be summed up in its bricolage of systems: despite its claims to use science to support the conception, testing, and production of its products, the other half of the effort comes from Asprey's personal journey — his total lifestyle: a set of principles of self-cultivation without which the promised results cannot be achieved. Besides contributing to the projection of a self-image that amalgamates his personal and corporate “personas”, this union of various categories is at the roots of Asprey's constructed effects of authenticity: while he utilises the “scientific claim” as a core value in the products, the affiliation to the system of science is not complete and can only form the discourse of *Bulletproof* when combined with his self-experimentation, which includes Science's opposite — Spiritual, non-Western Ancient wisdom. The core promise — of the products, the media and publishing content produced by Asprey, and in his own personal discourse, which are intended to be consumed together — manifests a marked discourse of *resistance*, which Floch (1995, p. 213) associates with *bricolage* as the realisation of an identity as a movement of divergence. In this case, it is a stance of *dissent* from the medical establishment and the existing tools to support health that can only be communicated through the contrast of opposites.

### 1.1 The bionic eagle

Figure 1: *Bulletproof* logos from 2011 (top), 2017 (middle), and 2020 (bottom).



Source: [bulletproof.com](http://bulletproof.com), [daveasprey.com](http://daveasprey.com)

Throughout his essays dedicated to the study of logos, Floch defines visual identity as *difference* (recognition) and *permanence* (duration of industrial, economic, and social values) in one (FLOCH, 1995, p. 43). More than visual signs that represent a business enterprise, a logo is a (visual) manifestation of a brand's story and history, containing the company's values, its contribution to the industry, its commercial relations, and the benefits to the client (FLOCH, 1995, p. 56). In a nutshell, Floch explores the possibility that visual objects can reveal without being transposed (or translated) into text: in this statement rests the argument for a Plastic Semiotics.

In the dictionaries, “designed to resist the penetration of bullets”, *Bulletproof* has other colloquial meanings in Anglo-Saxon culture: from something that is safe from failure to the ability to withstand adversity. Particularly in its frequent processes of rebranding, the brand is emblematic of Floch's vision of visual identities and their significant potential. The most noteworthy trait of the brand's first logo (see Figure 1) is the choice of the bald eagle, an animal rich in symbolism in American culture: simultaneously an animal native to the land now occupied by the USA and part of the Shamanic practices of its pre-colonial Indigenous inhabitants, the eagle and *Bulletproof's* ethos form a semi-symbolic system where the eagle's dual existence as an animal and a spiritual totem is homologated to a content category of Science vs Religion, as well as New vs Ancient, and Artificial vs Natural. The system constituted plastically, through the brand's visual identity, is reiterated throughout Asprey's web content and books, where he tells the story of his Shamanic vision quest: a moment of “spiritual awakening” marking the start of his health recovery journey, where a bald eagle's feather — a symbol of wisdom and courage — has particular personal significance to Asprey as a tool for healing (ASPREY, 2021, p. 89).

The 2011 logo's plane of expression contrasts the eagle's form, representing the animal, with the typography representing the brand's name and its mission statement. Like the eagle manifests the term *Natural* while simultaneously uniting contrasts of three other categories, the verbal form also contains its own contrasts: the plain typeface in the mission statement with the Natural, Ancient, non-Western, and Religious values; and display typeface, the brand's name that stands for Artificial, New, Western, and Science. Equally, the contrast of terms is reaffirmed in the chromatic: the bald eagle's natural colours are partially reversed in the logo, where the eagle has a black head and extremities (instead of white). The artificial inversion of the head and wings rhymes with the black typeface, continuing both the logo's and eagle's internal semi-symbolism. Finally, in its composition, the elements create contrasts of left vs right as well as downwards vs upwards—both tensions communicating *passages* from one value to the other, which, together, tell a story of *progress*, *development*, and *transcendence*.

Table 1: *Bulletproof* 2011 and 2017.

	2011 logo	2017 logo
<b>Expression</b>	<i>Eidetic</i>	Eagle's body vs Typograph Mission vs Name Plain typeface vs Display typeface
	<i>Chromatic</i>	Red/Orange vs Black
	<i>Topological</i>	Left vs Right Downwards vs Upwards
<b>Content</b>		Natural vs Artificial Ancient vs New non-Western vs Western Religion vs Science

Source: Elaborated by the author.

The first rebranding in 2017 marks a passage from *healing* to *self-improvement*, in which the logo's plastic manifestation refers to a transformation in Asprey's web content and publications. This process is marked by radical plastic simplification. The logo loses the company mission statement and passes to a monochromatic presentation, eliminating the colour contrast present in the first logo and embracing the colour orange as a defining aspect of its identity. Besides its use to identify dangerous and explosive substances, the colour is significant to two spaces Asprey unites in his discourse: hacker culture and Silicon Valley corporate environments. Equally, the contrast of plain and display typefaces is lost, replaced with lettering in a straight block that becomes slightly *bolder* — a movement that reverberates the same transformation in the products and discourses of brand and founder, which also contributes to a stronger alignment between the brand's identity and the founder's discourse, resulting in branding that is more "authentic", from an audience perspective.

The most important transformation, however, is in the simplification of the eagle, which is replaced by a solid, angular, geometric outline. This rebirth communicates a transformation in the material formant, proposed in the works of Ana Claudia de Oliveira (2004). Reduced to its most essential traits, the eagle loses its feathers, which are replaced with an empty outline which manifests a *polished surface* of machinic matter that also refers to *sacred geometry*. No longer an exclusively spiritual guide of healing but an empty, robotic version of the bird, through its materiality, the second eagle manifests a complete fusion with technology that, notwithstanding, sustains a connection with non-Western spiritual traditions. Aligned with the writing of *Super Human* (ASPREY, 2019), this rebranding marks *Bulletproof's* full entrance into the biohacking space, presenting a plastic variation of the same category in the plane of the content: Ancient spirituality and Technology. Rather than threatening its identity, the transformation in the branding supports the alignment with the perpetual advancement of science: to move alongside science becomes a central part of

communicating the brand's promise but, equally, the changes in the logo also communicate *the consumer's* transformation, manifesting the results of following and enacting the brand's total lifestyle.

The second rebranding, in the year 2020, marks the moment when Dave Asprey stepped down as *Bulletproof's* CEO. In this process, the logo is simplified further, eliminating the contrasts in all formants: the colour orange is maintained, but the eagle disappears, and the lettering becomes even bolder and simpler. The simultaneous departure of Asprey and the eagle are strongly associated through the constant references to the animal as his personal "spirit totem". However, the true transformation is manifested by the plain, bold lettering, which consolidates the increased *authority* of the brand. Marking the transition of *Bulletproof* from a dissenting actor in the space to a mainstream phenomenon as a reputable and reliable brand when it comes to products that are accepted—by the establishment! — as "game changers", the loss of the eagle marks the completion of the brand's transformation — from dissenting phenomenon to its incorporation in the mainstream — and its public acceptance by a wider audience. In other words, if the first rebranding marks *Bulletproof's* entrance into the biohacking space, the second marks its exit by removing the brand from a process of *resistance* and displacing it to the realm of trends—which, following Leroi-Gourhan, Floch (1995, p. 208) defines as a tension towards *conformity*. Similarly, this loss of nuance accompanied by the elimination of plastic contrasts can be read as the consolidation of *Bulletproof* as a symbolic system where "*Bulletproof* means bulletproof" — the brands' manifested logo is identical to the plane of content — which results from the resolution of conflicts that are typical of semi-symbolic systems. From this analysis, we could risk arguing that, in branding, the semi-symbolism manifested in *Bulletproof's* first logos was a mark of challenging existing market structures and systems, while the increasing trend of "flatter" logos manifests less complex semiotic structures that aim to signify "certainty".

## 1.2 The *Bulletproof* Diet

In his analysis of the cuisine of Michel Bras, Floch (1995) explores more than the visual identities, delving into the meanings of the food cooked by the chef and the mythologies emerging from the ingredients and their alchemical transformations. Similarly to the present case, Bras's cuisine intersects personal and brand discourses — even if, for Floch (1995, p. 93), the founder's personal circumstances are *hors de propos*. In his analysis of the dish of bass with buttermilk and fennel, Malabar spinach and quenelle of sage bread, he explores the conjunction of contraries as mythologies constructed through the dish and their communication through the brand's visual identity. Through a detailed analysis of the dish and its components, the plastic signs utilised by the brand

are shown to be in close semantic correspondence with the ingredients and their *esthetic* qualities of taste, smell, and texture.

Despite *Bulletproofs* existence as a company whose primary products are supplements, the majority of its discourse is around dietary interventions: regimens of fasting, exercise, and an elimination diet<sup>1</sup>. Even though the brand and founder present their claims through a discourse that appropriates elements of scientific language, the pillars of this diet possess inherent cultural values anchored in specific mythologies. On the one hand, the most emblematic foods of the *Bulletproof Diet* are also some of the most emblematic products of American alimentary culture — coffee, butter, and beef — and, together with broccoli and MCT oil, those foods make the ranking of most polemical edibles from the past years, betraying an *ethos* of polarisation (and, thus, polemic) in which the diet is grounded — a system of conjunction of contraries.

Asprey is mostly known for the “invention” of the global sensation *Bulletproof coffee*: a hot drink made from black coffee processed in a high-speed blender with one or two tablespoons of grass-fed butter. Not an invention strictly speaking, but an adaptation of a centuries-old Tibetan drink made of Yak butter and black tea — *Bho Jha*, which translates as “Tibetan tea” or *Cha Süma*, “churned tea” — it made headlines for its alleged benefits in cutting cravings for carbohydrates, supporting weight loss, and the benefits to brain health, while some persecuted him for spreading “pseudo-scientific” fad-diets and categorised the drink as harmful due to the high-fat content. With the founding of *Bulletproof*, the recipe was further upgraded to include MCT (medium-chain triglycerides) oil — specifically *Bulletproofs* patented “Brain Octane oil”: a refined product made of MCTs from extra-virgin coconut oils, which are re-refined, removing the bulk of short-chain triglycerides that make the majority of the oil, leaving only the most beneficial “C8” (hence the name *octane*). As much as butter, MCTs also divide the science and nutrition community, sustaining the polarising isotopy at the roots of *Bulletproofs* brand, diet, and programmes.

Coffee, in and of itself, is also a polarising product that can embody the conjunction of contrary values: *naturalness* (a medicinal plant) and *technology* (that has to be processed through various steps so as to deliver its “expected effects”) as well as the opposites of *necessity* and *luxury*. Indeed, the antithetical existence of coffee confers it a quasi-status of *Pharmakon*, embodying the structure of ambiguity Jacques Derrida identified for the word in the writings of Plato: not only that which can go from medicine to poison but the quality of a

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<sup>1</sup> The pillars of the *Bulletproof* diet are the elimination of products Asprey considers to be “food Kryptonites”—besides the usual refined sugars and grains, and grain and seed oils, all grains and beans must be avoided, as well as entire groups of vegetables that are potentially poisonous to some people, such as nightshades and leafy greens high in oxalic acid, all fruit (except for berries and lemons), and all dairy, except for butter and ghee. The diet also focuses on the introduction of more fat from animal sources and the increased intake of permitted vegetables.

substance that is also its anti-substance — what, in giving itself as a medicine, can be corrupted into poison; or what giving itself as a poison, can reverse into a remedy (DERRIDA, 2006). Aside from being a mythical object from Western culture, coffee is also one of *Bulletproof's* products, with the unique selling point of *purity*: “clean-sourced”, prepared through the “*Bulletproof* process” of thorough washing and drying, with every batch tested for toxins<sup>2</sup>. Rather than the utopian value of taste, which often features in the branding of coffee, the utilitarian value of “safety from toxins” becomes enmeshed *as* a utopian value, enacting yet another conjunction of contraries in the plane of content. In answering Floch’s (1995) question about *what* nature and *what* culture a brand communicates, the culture of *technology* — particularly *futuristic* technology — is a core value, which appears side by side with the mythical nature of *superfoods*—natural products with alleged exceptional nutritional values that can enact miracles in our organism, supporting the brand’s goals of optimal corporeal performance in the encounter of nature and technology.

Both product and recipe emerge from multi-phase alchemical processes, conjoining three already alchemised products: the extract from cow’s cream, butter, which is only the most beneficial, purest fat; the extract from coconuts that is re-extracted only for the most functional C8; and the extract from coffee beans that were previously washed, dried, purified from toxins, to then be roasted, ground, and brewed. Rather than stirred, the mixture must be blended on high speed: a technological process where a forced, material conjunction of animal and vegetable, nature-made and man-improved, liquid and solid, water and oil is enacted. The result is a cup of a creamy beverage that (allegedly) enhances the nutritional value and bioavailability of all the components, which are both preserved but changed — an uncanny union that, in conjoining contraries, amplifies their polarity.

Similarly to the operations described by Hammad in the preparation and serving of foods in the Japanese tea ceremony, foods in different states, from different origins, and carrying different cultural meanings enact a conjunction of contraries in the *hic et nunc* of the ceremony. Like the Hassun plate presents the space for the conjunction of competing systems of value — a syncretism that communicates the values of harmony in the universe, as well as the harmony between people, ideas, and things (HAMMAD, 1986, p. 93) — the *Bulletproof* coffee conjoins its specific culture and nature, as well as competing systems of knowledge. On the one hand, the Ancient Tibetan wisdom of churned tea communicates its own mythical and cultural conjunction of a polemic union: the custom of forcibly “marrying” Yak butter (a staple of Tibetan cuisine) and black tea (a Chinese product) is linked to the legend of a Chinese princess marrying the King of Tibet. The use of technological apparatuses to optimise this wisdom

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. <https://shop.bulletproof.com/collections/coffee>

both in its mechanical preparation and in its nutritional benefits adds a set of myths from Western cultures and its *ethos* of optimisation and acceleration. Rather than *harmony* between competing systems, Asprey's conjunction of contraries aims at *elevating* both systems, reiterating an isotopy of *transcendence*.

If the coffee is a figure of *fast* — Asprey's "easy way" to go without food by replacing breakfast with a cup of buttered coffee — the grass-fed steak is the figure of *feast*. The dish of steak and broccoli (finished with butter and C8) is the most mentioned food in Asprey's books, interviews, and in his own podcast<sup>3</sup>. Although the chips analysed by Barthes are not *Bulletproof*, his statements about steak describe the exact mythology invoked by Asprey: the heart of meat in its purest state, permitting the assimilation of a "bull-like strength" by those who partake in it (BARTHES, 2009). While Barthes creates a symmetry between steak and wine, with steak appearing as a "redeeming" of food that exorcises the altering effects of wine, the intoxicating figure in the *Bulletproof* diet is coffee: a narcotic with effects that are inebriating to the brain, constructing the same need for "equalisation" through the consumption of a symmetrically potent food with opposite attributes.

Asprey's (2019, 2021) emphasis on the need for eating meat that is grass-fed, coming from animals that are free to graze and move, places his discourse in opposition to the industrial meat commonly consumed in America and Europe today, investing grass-fed steak with a value of *naturalness*. The "only lightly cooked" — as charring the meat is said to produce carcinogenic compounds that speed up ageing... — grass-fed steak is served with broccoli: a vegetable simultaneously considered to be the healthiest but consistently utilised as a figure disseminating the *opposite of pleasure*, the presupposed counterpoint to sweets and junk foods in advertising and popular culture. A plant from the brassica family, broccoli is one of the many vegetables that are not naturally occurring but the result of selective breeding and genetic engineering to produce a crop that is suited to our tastes and needs — a contrast with the concept of pasture-raised meats that invoke figures of *wildness* and *ancestral practices*. Similarly to the coffee recipe, the *Bulletproof* dish is a discursive variation of the same conjunction occurring at the fundamental level: the alchemising of nature and technology, animal and vegetable, with the aim of conjoining both systems of value in the creation of a mutually-enhancing ensemble. Furthermore, the presence of butter and C8 oil in the dish echoes their function in the coffee: "amplifiers" capable of enhancing both the intoxicating effects of coffee and the redemptive attributes of beef and broccoli, continuing the isotopy of *improvement* and *transcendence* through the consumption of products that can

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. (ASPREY, 2017, 2019, 2021) and <https://daveasprey.com/category/podcasts/>

maintain the equilibrium between opposing terms while potentiating their effects.

Although the dish is made of (quasi) natural foods, the technological intervention and alchemical steps leading to its presentations and enhanced value rhyme with the bionic eagle, continuing the same myth of the *Übermensch*. If the bionic eagle is a “trans-eagle” that emerges as an improved version of itself with newly acquired technological attributes, the processes of food preparation and consumption also disseminate the theme of food beyond food, in which the performance of ingredients is elevated so as to enact a similar transformation in the body, which can then also manifest the same conjunction of contraries, conjoining the founder’s discourse, the brand, and the consumer’s body into one discursive identity — the idea of “living awesome”. The series of categories of expression found in the branding and in the lifestyles of *Bulletproof* are in correspondence with categories in the plane of content — Science and Religion, Futuristic and Ancient, Transhuman and Human — with both planes mirroring the fusion of opposing terms as mutually presupposed elements: a forced conjunction of contraries that emerges as the core *ethos* supporting the brand and the founder’s story.

## 2. The semiotic symmetry of *Bulletproof* and *Primal Blueprint*

Emerging from the same ideological system as *Bulletproof* — which could be summed up in the idea of “living awesome” — *Primal Blueprint* positions itself in apparent opposition to Asprey’s brand. Both occupy the health, wellness, and longevity sector, communicating to a mostly male audience and emblematising the trend of brands carrying a total lifestyle which includes the engagement with products outside of the brand’s offer and life practices that are not products in and of themselves. Yet, the personal stories of founders touch, although producing divergent arcs: a semiotic symmetry similar to the one identified by Floch between Apple and IBM.

In his analysis, Floch (1995, p. 70) identified logos with the phenomenon of preservation and semiotic inversion he associated with Greimas’ “absence of innocence” of figurativity: a dimension where second significations — connotations — actualise themselves in the production and apprehension of sense. In the present case, two brands in the same market sector appear grounded in a shared plane of content and, yet, manifest as visual identities that constitute antitheses of one another, communicated through a secondary, connotative content of expression where the grammatical structures and figurative universes of the brands’ identities diverge. To debate such “false oppositions” in the sector is a relevant discussion contributing to the understanding of contemporary market dynamics between brands and how

superficial contrasts are used to communicate a shared foundation of values—in the present case, the apparent inversion of values between *Bulletproof* and *Primal Blueprint* appears as the “noise” altering the purity of discourse which Roland Barthes (1970, p. 14) associated with connotation.

### 2.1. A Primal Blueprint

Describing himself as an athlete, coach, and student, Mark Sisson (69) is immediately recognisable by his superhero physique, constantly filmed and photographed topless and barefoot and performing workouts outdoors — a visual opposition to Asprey’s personal style and settings, which often involve technological contraptions and medical-grade equipment, and iconic wearables such as the *truedark* glasses.

First published in 2009, *The Primal Blueprint* is an eternal bestseller in its fourth revised edition (now *The New Primal Blueprint*). In Sisson’s words, “... the *Primal Blueprint* is a way of life, not a boot camp... [it] isn’t about temporary fixes or fad gimmicks” (SISSON, 2009, p. 496) but “guidelines” for a long-term lifestyle change.

Aside from collaborating in content production, Asprey and Sisson share core traits in their personal discourse: an isotopy of dissent and suspicion of what Sisson names “Conventional Wisdom with capitals”. That isotopy is disseminated through the storytelling of personal trajectories trying to improve health but not being helped by existing diets and medical practice. However, their trajectories getting there couldn’t be more distinct. While Asprey claims to have departed from extreme illness following a linear trajectory towards “super human health”, Sisson asserts he started at the polar opposite: a successful endurance athlete in his youth, he experienced overuse injuries (fatigue, osteoarthritis, and tendonitis) and chronic gastrointestinal illness before reemerging as a lifestyle thought leader (SISSON, 2009).

While Asprey’s discourse took futuristic technology as the answer to his illnesses, relying on emerging experimental technology to restore his health, Sisson’s discourse looked *backwards*: not the Ancient past, but the Palaeolithic, an era pre-dating our current paradigms of *civilisation*. Rather than a “new” way of approaching diet, Sisson is openly advocating for principles “as old as the dawn of mankind”, stripping away the layers of “terrible mistakes” we made as a civilised society. The *Primal Blueprint* advocates a return to what humans did before the passage to agricultural societies: eat plants and animals (insects optional...); avoid poisonous things; move frequently; lift heavy things; sprint once in a while; get plenty of sleep; play; get plenty of sunlight; avoid stupid mistakes; and use your brain (SISSON, 2009).

While there is a temporal gap (more or less 3.3 million years) separating Sisson's and Asprey's discourses, their ideology, regimens, and brands come full circle into two orienting myths of Western culture: the search for the Grail and the quest for an ideal, improved human being. For Asprey, this *Übermensch* is still going to emerge through technological implements aimed at extending life (mainly in terms of *quality*); but, in Sisson's discourse—an extension of his personal bodily experience — the improved human has *already passed*, and needs to be *recovered*: he believes we are the result of a “de-evolution” caused by technology that made us vacuous, obese, and ill<sup>4</sup>. While Asprey's personal trajectory, personal discourse, and brand are grounded on linear progress from unwell to well to “Super Human”, constructing a narrative of constant search for (forward) development, Sisson's discourse and personal trajectory are grounded in a narrative of circularity: an initial state of wellness, followed by the loss and *recovery* of health, *circling back* to recover a previous state.

## 2.2 Grok and Korg: the hunter-gatherer and the Conventional Wisdom man

As a verbal manifestation, *Primal Blueprint* manifests contrasting systems marking its foundations. In the dictionaries, *Primal* refers to the “early stage in evolutionary development” while also meaning the most important — primary, fundamental. In contrast, a *Blueprint* is a design, a plan, a template. Furthermore, the verbal is where the first contrast with *Bulletproof* can be gauged: a composed noun, the name contains the forward progression of B to P in the alphabet, versus the backward movement of P to B in the two words *Primal Blueprint*. However, *Blueprint* is also a composed noun: the circular (and backward) progression in which P, through B, returns to P is also manifested. The brands' names mirror one another but are also expressions of two distinct temporal ideologies.

The pictogram present across all of *Primal Nutrition Inc.*'s logos makes its first appearance in Sisson's (first) *The Primal Blueprint*. His well-humoured account of the contrasts between the *Primal* principles and the “Conventional Wisdom” he believes to be the cause of all our problems is illustrated with two characters embodying the results of each set of practices and, as a contrasting pair, forming the semantic universe that grounds *Primal Blueprint*: Grok and Korg (see Figure 2).

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<sup>4</sup> Cf The Human Upgrade episode #101

Figure 2: *Primal Nutrition* and *Primal Kitchen* logos (top and middle) and illustrations of Korg and Grok (bottom).



Source: primalblueprint.com, *The Primal Blueprint* (2009).

On the side of the *Primal* principles, we have Grok: an active hunter-gatherer illustrated performing an athletic jump—towards the left: “going backwards”. In contrast, Korg (Grok spelt backwards), the Conventional Wisdom man, is represented as an obese male wearing a tie, showing entitlement though his spine inclined to the right, fists on hips—looking towards the future (with a mix of cynicism and indignation...) In a first reading, Grok’s messy hair, the fur skirt often present in stereotyped images of prehistoric humans, the bare feet reaching in the jump, and the rudimentary spear associated with the Palaeolithic denote the *Primal Blueprint’s* ideal state of being and its aforementioned principles. In contrast, Korg is the emblem of an idealised American *status quo*: a suited office worker, sedentary, echoing the hubris of Western scientific systems but suffering from chronic conditions plastically emblematised as *obesity*.

Starting with the *Primal Blueprint* logo, Korg gives way to the brand’s name, and the opposition of *Primal* and *Conventional Wisdom* appears in the contrast of human form (Grok) and the typography. Similarly to the first *Bulletproof* logo, the written element contains an internal contrast of typefaces: “Primal”—the most important—appears in a bold typeface with serif, whereas “Blueprint”—the civilised, scientific element—appears in a slim, sans serif typeface. In a monochrome blue, the logo doesn’t present chromatic contrasts, but the composition is significant: jumping mountains formed by “Primal”, Grok

is the largest figure at the top, marking a hierarchy where the human form is the most important element. The brand also uses the contrast of left and right, but its valorisation of direction is reversed: while, for *Bulletproof*, the direction *forward* is the most euphoric, for *Primal Blueprint*, the upwards-left direction, going *backwards*, is the most euphoric. While the categories come from the author’s vocabulary (see Table 2), those are very similar pairs to the ones used by *Bulletproof* in the construction of their own mythical universe, even if the investment of values in one term and the other is reversed.

**Table 2:** Primal Blueprint and Primal Kitchen.

	<i>Primal Blueprint</i>	<i>Primal Kitchen</i>
<b>Expression</b>	<i>Eidetic</i> Human form vs Typograph Bold/serif vs Slim/sans serif	Human form vs Typograph Bold/serif vs Slim/sans serif
	<i>Chromatic</i> Blue [Natural colour vs Artificial colour]	Green vs Grey
	<i>Topological</i> Top vs Bottom Left vs Right	Top vs Bottom Left vs Right
<b>Content</b>	Primal vs Conventional Wisdom Palaeolithic vs Civilisation Natural vs Scientific	

**Source:** Elaborated by the author.

The subtle variation in *Primal Kitchen* (food brand) introduces contrast in the chromatic, also exaggerating the eidetic contrast in the typography. Grok and *Primal* appear in a vibrant green, which references the colour of avocados—the main ingredient of the sauces and dips sold by the brand<sup>5</sup>—while *Kitchen* appears in dark grey. If a “Blueprint” as a “plan to be abandoned” can be conciliated with Grok and Primal in the chromatic, “Kitchen” unquestionably belongs in the realm of Conventional Wisdom, Civilisation, and Science—thus aligning with Korg and the values he denotes. Furthermore, the eidetic contrast of bold serif typeface and thin sans serif communicates a movement of “slimming” much more pronounced than in the original logo, communicating more emphatically the idea of weight loss. Instead of standing on the top, the smaller Grok appears to be jumping *out of the Kitchen*: a manifestation of contradictions between brand and the founder’s discourse—a “Primal-approved” brand of processed foods amidst the championing of a lifestyle of eating and living *naturally*.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. <https://www.primalkitchen.com/>.

### 2.3 The connotative language of *Bulletproof* and *Primal Blueprint*

Table 3: Bulletproof and Primal Blueprint.

		<i>Bulletproof 2017</i>	<i>Primal Blueprint</i>
Expression	Eidetic	Written vs Animal Filled vs Outlined Machine vs Sacred geometry	Human vs Written Bold/serif vs Slim/sans serif
	Chromatic	Orange [Artificial colour vs Natural colour]	Blue [Natural colour vs Artificial colour]
	Topological	Right vs Left	Left vs Right Top vs Bottom
Content	Artificial vs Natural New vs Ancient Western vs non-Western Science vs Religion	Primal vs Conventional Wisdom Palaeolithic vs Civilisation Natural vs Scientific	
Content	Substance: rejection of the status quo (standard medical and dietary practices)		
	Form: "Living awesome"		

Source: Elaborated by the author.

With the goal of discussing the matter of projected authenticity, the comparative will focus on the two versions of the logos communicating the best alignment between brand and founder ideologies. Furthermore, the 2017 *Bulletproof* and *Primal Blueprint* logos also communicate a “halfway” point in each brand’s journey towards the mainstream, constituting the most privileged corpus to gauge their symmetry and the connotations they produce.

At the surface level, the identities of *Bulletproof* and *Primal Blueprint* appear as opposed: form, typefaces, and composition of written and pictographic elements. While both logos are monochromatic, the colours themselves contrast with one another, reinforcing the most euphoric value in the categories utilised by each brand: the artificial, “dangerous orange” of *Bulletproof* versus *Primal Blueprint*’s blue referencing water and sky. Anyhow, both colours *can* manifest a contrast in their monochromatism: orange is also a colour of fruits and vegetables permitted in the *Bulletproof diet*, whereas blue could invoke the technological phenomenon of blueprints. Finally, the contrasting directions and the opposed phorias of forwards and backwards are embraced by each brand, as well as their respective founders.

The same phenomenon is observed in the diets, which, although responding to the same plane of content, produce distinct expressions and contents of manifestation. Like the *Bulletproof diet*, the *Primal Blueprint* focuses on eliminating the agricultural staples of corn, wheat, and soy, ultra-processed foods, added sugars, and grain and seed oils. Equally, both diets harness the worship of consuming meat and “ancestral” gathered foods. If *Bulletproof* places central emphasis on the alchemical processes of extracting and transforming

products into their optimal versions, for *Primal Blueprint*, the natural state is already the most optimal, perfect form. Rather than the bricolage of myths forming the base of Asprey's discourse, Sisson's discourse returns to the single myth of the hunter-gatherer and his perfect integration with nature and its rhythms.

Although each brand displays its own expression and content, at a deeper level, the form and substance of the plane of content are isomorphic. Both brands are aligned with the ideology of "living awesome", and their figures of attitudes contain an equivalent substance of *dissent*—the layers of manifestations enabling the dissemination of equivalent discourses about living the best, healthiest lives start to diverge, as well as their trajectories getting there. While Asprey departs from radical dissent that is diluted all the way to the symbolic, Sisson's initial discourse is purist—where "Primal means primal"—slowly inviting contrast all the way to *Primal Kitchen*—a processed foods brand. In both cases, the semi-symbolic system manifests a sweet spot where success and projected authenticity can be conciliated, whereas the consolidation of symbolic systems appears as the start and end point where either projected authenticity or visibility are not possible.

Throughout *Identités Visuelles*, Floch presents the problem of trends and the emergence of a "*bricolage* style" he identified through the analysis of *Habitat*. He recognises that *bricolage* can be axiologised as contemporary and anti-conformist, which can become a style—a process he identifies with the two steps characterising Roman Jakobson's poetic doing: the creation of types and the appearance of automatism, followed by a selection and exploitation of those types in the creation of a new significant structure (FLOCH, 1995, p. 172). That complex process marks the passage from a "pure" *bricoleur* who collects and adapts, to a stereotyped *bricolage* that, instead of resisting the system, is integrated with it—and, thus, a deliberate doing that mimics the most superficial aspects of *bricolage*, becoming an *engineered* doing.

This phenomenon concerns both brands—even if they mirror one another. For Asprey's brand, it is a trajectory from the collage of systems all the way to an authoritative style that is so simplified and so aligned with the mainstream it becomes a symbolic system. On the other hand, Sisson's brand starts on a quasi-symbolic discourse that slowly gains complexity, using the semi-symbolic as a strategy to resolve contradictions between his personal discourse and the most successful brand, *Primal Kitchen*, which is the most distant from his founding principles. In both cases, the passage through genuine *bricolage* is what occasions the emergence of two lifestyles; however, as they progress towards more authoritative existences, their visual identities either leave *bricolage* (*Bulletproof*) or embody this mimetic *bricolage* that is the imitation of a significant doing without enacting it (*Primal Kitchen*). Rather than a simple

variation in the visual identity, or a transformation in style, it is this passage from an “authentic” *bricolage* to its engineered version that would enact a variation in the plane of content *de facto* — a passage from *dissent* to its simulation with the intention of *conformity*.

## Conclusion

The analysis of the visual, mythical, and ideological universes of *Bulletproof* and *Primal Blueprint* aimed at repeating some of Floch’s propositions to understand an emerging shift in the matter of identity — of a brand and of the people bringing it into existence — interrogating the pertinence of his work to the 21st-century context, where the boundaries of public and private are blurred and, at times, dissolved, creating situations where the identity of the consumer is also harnessed as part of a significant system.

The case of *Bulletproof* and *Primal Blueprint* shows that the outward opposition established between the brands is not fully realised in the plane of content but a connotation supported by a secondary expression where different stories and figurative universes disseminate the same values: in this case, the idea of “living awesome”, grounded in an ideology of *dissent*, elevating both brands from businesses to countercultural actors. Equally, both discourses are aligned with the emergence of *authenticity* as a core value in today’s consumption landscape. The stories of the founders become a baseline that constructs the veridiction contract of both brand promises—a system of meaning radically different from the “simulated authenticity” that dominated the market in the historical context of Floch’s writings. As such, *Bulletproof* and *Primal Blueprint* emerge as quasi-extensions of their founders: rather than being the “face of the brand” who “emulates” the brand discourses without truly enacting it, Asprey and Sisson invert this formula, being perceived as individuals who *live* and *have lived* the lifestyles they advocate, even *before* their brands were born, constructing their image as the walking evidence of their products’ legitimacy.

Besides selling the Grail of personal and collective transcendence, both founders also sold a timelessly high-value product: *distinction* through *dissent*, constructing a presupposed enunciatee that is “ahead of the curve”. In both cases, however, the transformations undergone by the brand are followed by transformations in their significant structures, in a process that marks the brands’ increase in authority and acceptance by a mainstream market — a process aligned with the emergence of a stereotyped *bricolage* that, instead of maintaining divergence, reaches toward the conformity with trends, thus aligning with the *status quo* instead of challenging it. We have remarked elsewhere that this process corresponds to a semiotic simplification enabling the translation of

countercultural manifestations into *status quo* through the deconstruction and reconstruction of cultural phenomena permitting to monetise rebellion as “novelty”.

Thus, that both founders stepped down their companies when these became mainstream also becomes a matter of identity: it is paramount to analyse the extent to which brands can acquire a life of their own, particularly when they are successful, literally “forcing out” the founders through the disjunction of core identities. Rather than a superficial change in the plane of expression and its connotations, the change resulting from the increased authority of *Bulletproof* and *Primal Blueprint* as “recognised” brands is in the plane of content *de facto*, affecting the category of *dissent* versus *conformity*. Considering the discourse of the founders, it is fair to affirm those brands were not born to *gain* the mainstream but, rather, to *destroy* it. Irrespective of whether they are constructed or authentic, when public and private identities become enmeshed, staying or leaving means to either co-exist in dissonance with one’s own brand’s discourse — would it be possible to conciliate *authenticity* and *scalability*? — or to change with the discourse the brand has now embraced — the death of personal identity, assimilating the identity of the creature.

Despite the temporal gap, our examination of *Bulletproof* and *Primal Blueprint* substantiate that Floch’s semiotic writings about identity remain relevant in the study of brands and the substances they utilise to articulate meaning — logos, campaigns and, today, the production of content — both as an isolated “entity” and in the relations constructed within a market sector. While the 21st-century context poses unique challenges, such as our interrogation about the separation of personal and corporate identities or the matter of an ever-evolving media landscape and the unique challenges it poses to the survival of brands, Floch’s writings and his personal beliefs about the importance of a semiotic “praxis” that avoids crystallising itself in “dogma” construct a certain timelessness to the core of his work. Responding to his claim for a Semiotics that “has a vision” (instead of “recipes”), our analysis attempted to honour the possibility of facing objects as almost subjects: for Floch, an exercise that, more than resulting in analyses, allows a semiotic theory to construct itself (FLOCH; BERTRAND, 1989, p. 121). ●

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 **O founder e sua marca: semiótica plástica, semi-simbolismo, e a amálgama de identidades corporativas e privadas no mercado de antienvelhecimento e bem estar**

 JARDIM, Marília

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**Resumo:** Por meio da análise de duas marcas no setor de saúde, bem estar, e longevidade — Bulletproof e Primal Blueprint — o artigo examina a amálgama das identidades de marca e das ideologias de estilo de vida de seus founders, criando um “estilo de vida total” que ultrapassa o consumo de mercadorias. As análises das duas marcas enquanto entidades isoladas e as relações que elas constroem dentro do setor explora os vários contrastes constituindo o problema da “identidade” — da marca e pessoal, pública e privada — utilizando conceitos e métodos desenvolvidos na obra de Jean-Marie Floch. Em especial, o artigo revisita sua Semiótica Plástica, explorando o semi-simbolismo manifesto nos logos e nos discursos alimentares produzidos pelas marcas. O artigo conclui com a reflexão sobre os mecanismos significantes que marcam a trajetória de ambas as marcas, de atores dissidentes a marcas investidas com autoridade e alinhadas ao status quo, interrogando em que medida tais trajetórias se alinham a transformações nas estruturas semióticas das marcas.

**Palavras-chave:** semiótica plástica; semi-simbolismo; identidades visuais; branding; bem estar e longevidade.

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